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Pro-regime Militias and Civil War Duration

Huseyn Aliyev

University of Glasgow

Research on civil war duration has tended to focus almost exclusively on governments and rebels as actors accounting for the longevity of armed conflicts. The impact of extra-dyad actors has thus far been absent from the analysis of factors contributing to civil war duration. This study contributes to both research on civil war duration and multi-actor models of intrastate conflicts by extending the analysis beyond the government-rebel dichotomy. With the focus on pro-regime militias, this article investigates whether the deployment of extra-dyad actors increases the duration of civil wars. Survival analysis models conducted on the sample of 250 civil war episodes between 1991 and 2015 reveal that participation of pro-regime militias in intrastate warfare has consistent association with the incidence of longer civil wars.

Why some civil wars last longer than others do, and what effect various actors have on conflict longevity? Do the number and type of conflict protagonists matter? This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of civil war duration and the role of extra-state actors involved in conflicts on the government's side, but remaining outside of the government-rebel equation. Amongst different extra-state actors, this study focuses on one particular type of quasi-state groups – pro-regime militias (PRMs).¹ It aims to examine whether the deployment of pro-regime militias in conflict zones increases the duration of armed conflict. With the above in mind, three interrelated hypotheses on the association between PRM presence and conflict duration are proposed. The key argument is that due to their vested interests in longer conflicts militias tend to act as “veto-players” reducing the likelihood of either peace or swift victory by either side of the dyad. Two supporting claims evolve from this argument, suggesting that pro-regime militias' ability to influence conflict duration is conditioned by their numbers and strength. Both of these criteria are expected to affect PRMs' interests and objectives in the context of civil wars. These claims are empirically tested on a sample of 250 intrastate conflict episodes between 1991 and 2015. Employing survival analysis models to test the hypotheses, reveals strong positive association between PRM involvement and longer civil war duration.

¹ The definition of pro-regime militias is adopted from Carey et al. (2013: 250), who categorise as pro-government militias any group (1) considered as pro-government or sponsored by the state; (2) functioning outside formal security forces; (3) armed and, (4) with some form of organisation.

By the end of 2014, there were more than 40 civil wars raging across the world (Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015: 536). Over 60% of these conflicts were civil wars lasting longer than five years. As posited by Collier et al. (2004: 254), on average civil wars last six times longer than interstate conflicts. In contrast to civil wars that last two years or less, conflicts lasting longer than five years generate on average 55,000 casualties (Lacina and Gleditsch 2005: 154). Longer civil wars are also much harder to terminate (Fearon 2004: 283). The problem of “accumulation” of civil wars, emphasised by Hegre (2004) more than a decade ago, becomes ever more critical today as new conflicts emerge much faster than the old ones terminate. Cross-continental flows of refugees, global terrorism, sanctions'-induced economic crises, and the drop in oil prices, all, to various degrees, influenced by civil violence around the world, increase the importance of understanding how and when civil conflicts terminate, and why some intrastate wars last longer than others.

The empirical observation that some civil wars end in less than a month, while others take decades to terminate, dates back to the early research on civil war onset, incidence and termination. Over the past several decades, a large and growing body of literature has been produced to explain this broad variation in the duration of civil wars. However, problems with the existing literature on conflict duration are plentiful. Research on civil war duration has tended to prioritise structural or state-centric approaches and to disregard agent-focused explanations of civil war longevity. With the focus on ethnicity, natural resources, state capacity, and economic incentives, the bulk of studies on conflict duration has tended to overlook the contribution of conflict protagonists towards conflict longevity. More recent literature acknowledges the lack of focus on the agency and has sought to incorporate dyadic two-actor models that emphasise the importance of governments and rebels as principal stakeholders in intrastate conflicts (Cunningham et al. 2009). Nevertheless, the literature on government and rebel characteristics, as factors expected to explain conflict duration, continues to exclude from the government-rebel dichotomy all other non-state actors.

The emerging tendency of departing from the government-rebel dualism in civil war studies is not accidental. The Uppsala Armed Conflict Database/Peace Research Institute of Oslo (UACD/PRIO) lists over 280 intrastate-armed conflicts active as of 2015. Almost 100 of these civil wars involve more than two conflict-stakeholders. The need to consider armed non-state actors beyond rebel groups is also not accidental. Recent databases of armed conflict actors tend to acknowledge that the majority of recent civil wars involve not only actors challenging the regime, such as various rebel factions, but also conflict agents

remaining outside the government-rebel dualism.² Challenging the presentation of civil wars as two-actor conflicts, this study argues that violent quasi-state actors exert influence not only on conflict dynamics, but also on its duration. With the focus on the role of extra-dyad agency in civil wars, this article contributes to the research on multi-actor models of civil war dynamics.

The first part of the article critically revisits literature on conflict duration and examines current trends in research on pro-regime militias. Next section develops theoretical arguments, which are quantitatively tested in the following part of the study. Notwithstanding space constraints, which prevent detailed qualitative case study analysis, the last section presents two brief case studies of recurring Chechen Wars.

Explaining civil war duration

Much of the existing literature on civil war duration draws on underlying structural or dynamic causes of conflict onset and incidence. Collier et al. (2004) approached the question of civil wars' length from the perspective of "rebellion as a business," proposing that conflicts would last as long as they are economically profitable for both sides. The authors argued that one of the key variables accounting for shorter conflict is "a decline in the prices of the primary commodities that the country exports" (2004: 253). The argument on economic incentives was explored more in detail by Fearon (2004) who posited that trafficking of valuable commodities, such as gems, timber and gold, reduces rebels' willingness to end warfare. Ross (2004), who echoed Fearon's (2004) assumption on the significance of contraband for civil war continuity, further examined the impact of mineral resources on conflict duration. Buhaug et al. (2009: 544) argued that not only natural resources, but also geographical factors (location and terrain) "interact with rebel fighting capacity and ... play a crucial role in determining the duration of conflict." The rough terrain argument was examined on the example of forest resources as shelters for rebels by Rustad et al. (2008: 762), who arrived to the conclusion that "that more forest cover leads to fewer and shorter conflicts."

Ethnicity as a cause of conflict duration featured prominently in studies by Sambanis (2001), Cederman et al. (2013), and Eck (2009). Scholars promoted the argument that civil wars fought over ethnic grievances easily become protracted and resilient to settlement. A

² For example, see the UCDP Non-State Conflict Database (Sundberg et al. 2012) and the UCDP Actor Dataset.

more nuanced analysis of ethnicity's effect on the length of civil wars was conducted by Wucherpfennig et al. (2012: 81), who found that "ethnicity matters primarily in situations of exclusionary ethnonationalist state policies," and "that rebel organizations which are associated with politically excluded ethnic groups fight the longest" (2012: 110). Notwithstanding the counter arguments (Mueller 2004), ethnicity continues to occupy the prominent role among other structural explanations of conflict duration (Eck 2009).

Fearon (2004) was amongst the first to advance the typology and variation of civil wars as explanation for their duration. Balcells and Kalyvas (2014) proposed that typologising civil wars in terms of irregular, conventional and symmetric-nonconventional conflicts helps explaining their duration. Their finding pertaining to civil wars' lengths was that "that irregular conflicts last significantly longer than all other types of conflict, while conventional ones tend to be more severe in terms of battlefield lethality" (2014: 1319). Other noteworthy structural and dynamic variables associated with conflict duration, include religion (Svensson 2007), conflict recurrence (Walter 2004), as well as the conflict severity and battlefield lethality (Lacina 2006). External factors, such as conflicts in neighbouring states, cross-border ethnic ties (Cederman et al. 2013), and refugees (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006) were considered as influential for the duration of armed conflicts.

The existing literature on actors and agency in civil war duration is rife with studies examining either government's properties, or the roles of rebels and external actors. For example, Buhaug et al. (2009: 546) discovered that "rebel military capacity in its own right increases the prospects of a civil conflict ending within a short time period." Cunningham et al. (2009: 14) hypothesised "that the duration of conflict in a dyad depends on the rebels' strength to target, capacity to resist, and ability to substitute for nonviolent dispute resolution mechanisms." Along with the rebel military strength (Clayton 2013), such factors as rebels' capacity to bargain, rebel motivations (Collier et al. 2004), external aid provided to rebels (Salehyan et al. 2009), and rebel willingness to integrate with governments (Glassmayer and Sambanis 2008), were employed to explain the duration of intrastate conflicts.

The crucial role of rebel-centred factors is echoed by the research on government properties. Military strength of incumbents became synonymous with shorter conflicts as stronger governments have higher chances to emerge victorious (Fearon 2004). However, the argument on government's military capacity was challenged by DeRouen and Sobek (2004: 303), who find that "an effective state bureaucracy undermines the rebels, but a strong government army does not necessarily enhance the government cause." The third set of actors thoroughly explored in the existing literature are external power brokers. The role of third-

party interventions has been presented as conducive to longer conflicts (Regan 2002). Either a direct third-party military intervention, or even an expectation that such assistance might be provided due to interstate rivalry, significantly increase the chances of prolonged warfare. The bulk of these studies examined civil wars from a two-actor perspective.

One of the few attempts to approach civil war duration from a multiparty perspective was a study by Cunningham (2006) that employed a “veto player” approach to demonstrate that “more parties involved in conflict make civil wars more difficult to resolve through negotiation and therefore of longer duration” (2006: 875). However, similarly to previous studies, Cunningham (2006: 877) categorised conflict participants as limited to the *government*, *domestic rebels* and *external actors*. Other scholars have sought to overcome the unitary actor assumption by emphasising diversity within rebel camps (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012). However, few studies have thus far sought to differentiate among the violent extra-state actors – beyond rebel groups – involved in armed conflicts, or to explain how different extra-state actors influence civil war duration. In consequence, little is known as to whether the presence, or absence, of certain extra-dyad actors affects the length of conflicts. This and many other questions pertaining to extra-dyad actors remain unanswered in the existing literature on civil war duration. Even less is known as to how quasi-state actors – or armed groups existing on the margins between state- and non-state actors, such as militias, pro-regime warlords, tribal coalitions, and various paramilitary structures – affect the duration of civil wars.

The arguments advanced in this article do not directly contradict the above discussed theoretical approaches. By contrast, economic incentives, ethnicity, the role of intervening parties, and the strength and capacity of the key dyadic actors provide essential analytical framework necessary to understand the dynamics of conflict duration. Nevertheless, the existing research – even the literature on multi-actor models – on conflict duration has failed to take into account the existence of additional conflict protagonists, existing outside of the government, rebels, and external actors’ triangle. Quasi-state actors remaining outside the government-rebel equation have thus far been disregarded in either research on civil war outcomes or in studies on conflict duration.

A snapshot of extra-dyadic actors: Pro-regime militias

Amongst the diversity of extra-dyad actors including, but not limited to, criminal networks, drug cartels, mafias, and private military contractors, involved in armed conflicts on either side of the dyad, pro-regime militias (PRMs) are notorious for their engagement in civil wars. According to Mitchell et al. (2014), pro-regime militias were involved in 80% of intrastate conflicts since 1981. The emergence of militias is also closely interwoven with the process of civil violence. In Carey et al.'s (2015: 851) estimates, almost 60% of pro-regime militias were assembled due to the incidence of armed intrastate conflicts. In an earlier study, Carey et al. (2013: 255) confirmed that the probability of civil war incidence in countries with militia presence is five times higher. Indeed, the casual inspection of the case-study literature suggests that the emergence and activity of pro-regime militias are closely associated with the incidence of armed conflicts (Mazzei 2009; Ahram 2011).

Existing research on militias posits that despite many militia groups are mobilised with the government's blessing and direct assistance, incumbents seek to maintain PRMs outside regular security forces and the army (Staniland 2015). Keeping distance from militias has been a time-tested approach practiced by governments since the onset of the Cold War (Campbell and Brenner 2002). In accordance with principal-agent theory (Carey et al. 2015), governments outsource to militias "dirty jobs," which they are unable or unwilling to do due to international laws. In consequence, militias are notorious for their roles in perpetrating large-scale violence against civilians. The militias' role in genocides (Ahram 2011), mass killings, sexual violence (Cohen and Nordås 2015), civilian victimisation (Stanton 2015), and human rights violations (Mitchell et al. 2014) is well documented. It is due to this "outsourcing" of violence advantage of PRMs that governments are keen to both retain distance from militias and to delegate PRMs some of their monopoly on violence.

The goals and objectives of PRMs are commonly aligned with interests of their state patrons. Irrespectively of their type, such as community defence groups, death squads, vigilantes or counterinsurgents, militias exist to challenge governments' opponents and to protect the state from rebels. PRMs exist outside of state structures not only because of governments' designs towards them, but also due to militias' own interests to preserve autonomy from the state. As detailed by Staniland (2015), militias' functions extend well beyond tasks envisioned for them by governments. Rather, PRMs maintain their own agendas and their own perception of dealing with the regime's opponents. As PRMs' strength increases vis-à-vis, the government, such as the case of Shia militias in Iraq or volunteer battalions in Ukraine, militias might tacitly challenge the state and ignore or disregard the government. While earlier studies on militias associated the emergence of PRMs with state

failure or state weakness (Mazzei 2009; Ahram 2011), more recent literature has dismissed a direct link between the state capacity and the appearance of militias (Carey et al. 2015). Both weak and strong states have deployed militias in order to avoid accountability for civilian victimisation and to delegate violence to extra-state agents, which irrespectively of the existence of implicit links to governments (Eck 2015), remain outside of formal state structures. Along with the logic of delegation of violence, pro-regime militias serve as convenient tools of counterinsurgency (COIN) (Carey et al. 2015). There is no lack of case studies suggesting that deploying militias not only provides incumbents with the cost effective COIN force (Peic 2014: 166), but also – due to the PRMs ability to access local information networks and to recruit renegade insurgents – supplies regular security forces with unique intelligence on rebels (Kalyvas 2006: 107).

The precise role of PRMs in civil wars is diverse. Some militia groups function as civilian defence units, or as village guards (Clayton and Thomson 2013), others operate as shadowy death squads hunting down rebel supporters (Campbell and Brenner 2002). These types of militia organisations undermine rebel civilian support bases, cripple supply networks and collect intelligence. Another type of militias are numerous and heavily armed militia armies, such as the Sudanese Janjaweed or Iraqi Shia volunteer battalions, which function either as auxiliary units deployed alongside the regular army, or as the main COIN force, as was the case with pro-Russian Chechen paramilitaries *kadyrovtsy*. In their roles in armed conflicts, militias manifest themselves as crucial conflict protagonists, existing outside the government-rebel dichotomy.

Despite the critical role of PRMs in many post-World War II irregular conflicts, studies specifically examining the militia phenomenon have only begun to emerge over the past decade (Mazzei 2009; Ahram 2011). The literature on militias' involvement in civil wars is even more recent and even less comprehensive (Jentzsch et al. 2015; Stanton 2015). The question of whether militias influence civil war duration remains unaddressed, and militias, along with other extra-dyad actors, remain excluded from multi-actor approaches to studying civil wars.

Militias as “veto players” in intrastate conflicts

The main theoretical argument of this study is that pro-regime militias involved in civil wars act as “veto-players” with vested interests in longer conflict duration. These interests are

double-edged in that they reflect militias' own agendas in profit-making and political objectives, as well as the governments' intentions behind assembling and preserving PRMs. Militias' specific intrinsic interests in the continuation of the war include, but not limited to, revenues from illegal activities, struggle for political offices, territorial control and retaining monopoly on violence. Whilst during civil wars, incumbents' and militias' interests are likely to collide leading to mutually beneficial cooperation, the end of conflicts endangers both the PRMs' collaboration with their patrons and their sources of revenue.

Since pro-regime militias provide crucial COIN assistance to incumbents and enable governments to improve their methods of targeting regime opponents, PRMs might be expected to function as key conflict protagonists. Militias not only perform tasks entrusted on them by incumbents, but they also pursue their own interests. These include extracting financial benefits from the conflict (Kalyvas 2006). Militias are well-known for their involvement in drug trade, human trafficking, smuggling and efforts to gain profits from natural resources such as oil, timber and gems (Mazzei 2009). In line with the economic approach to civil war duration (Collier et al. 2004), PRMs might be expected to continue fighting as long as the war is profitable. Along with protecting incumbents from regime opponents, "greed" incentives are amongst the key motivations for PRMs to continue violence. With the exception of ethnic groups, which might be less gain-focused, militias tend to mobilise their fighters on a combination of "greed" and "grievances"-centred motivations (Kalyvas 2006: 97-99). Although protecting the regime might be one of the top incentives of militia leadership (Aliyev 2017), individual combatants – as shown by the case-study literature– tend to be driven heavily by material incentives (Nussio 2011).

Post-conflict peacebuilding, reconstruction and reconciliation processes create immense challenges for militia activities. Not only the engagement in illicit profit-making, but also financial assistance from government patrons become less feasible during peace processes. As was the case with Karen BFG in post-2012 Myanmar and North Ireland's UVF after the Good Friday Agreement, incumbents were no longer willing to turn the blind eye on militias' involvement in criminal activities. Hence, the fear of losing primary sources of funding may transform PRMs into peace spoilers and conflict proponents. In contrast to governments and rebels, militias gain little from conflict termination and, therefore, might be expected to emerge as the least consensus-friendly actors amongst all other conflict protagonists.

The presence of PRMs in conflict zones does not indicate that militias are directly involved in fighting, or that they perform COIN tasks. Some militia groups may serve as civilian guards or perform other non-combat-related duties. However, the existence of PRMs

transforms the conflict from a two-actor confrontation into a multi-actor civil war. In accordance to Cunningham (2006), the presence of multiple actors, or “veto players” in conflict settings decreases the chances of conflict resolution through negotiation and extends the conflict. Unlike rebel groups or external parties, such as third-party actors, militias are rarely invited to join peace talks and are often excluded from peace deals.

Conflict termination from the perspective of quasi-state actors, is not only the disappearance of financial income, but is also a likely disappearance of the government’s interest towards preserving militias. The cases of Colombia’s right-wing AUC paramilitaries and Sierra Leone’s Kamajors showed that as soon as PRMs become redundant or uncontrollable, incumbents seek to disband them even before the end of conflict. However, demobilising a PRM is never a straightforward process, even for an incumbent determined to remove militias from the veto players’ list. Bearing in mind that militias are quasi-state structures, retaining a varying degree of autonomy from the state, militias may evade demobilisation by re-grouping or re-organising in similarly structured armed groups. For example, the demobilisation of AUC paramilitaries was followed by the outflow of ex-militias into right-wing criminal paramilitary structures (BACRIM - *bandas criminales*). Regardless of the demobilisation of AUC, militia members continued to contribute both to the economy of war and to its dynamics (Nussio and Oppenheim 2014).

From the perspective of anti-regime rebels, the end of conflict leads to defeat, victory, or consensus. The last two outcomes entail some sort of transformation of rebel organisations either into legitimate political actors or in other forms of power-brokers. For PRMs, all three conflict outcomes entail either demobilisation or transformation into a different type of political or military organisation. However, to date few militia groups have managed to either successfully transform into political organisations, or to incorporate into formal security forces. Examples from present-day Ukraine (Aliyev 2016) and Iraq (Thurber 2014) demonstrate that legalising PRMs as part of conventional armed forces does not necessarily decrease militias’ involvement in illegal practices, or encourage their integration with formal security forces. The example of anti-LTTE Tamil militias in post-conflict Sri Lanka illustrates that the PRMs’ transformation into political organisations may be very challenging (Kingsbury 2012).

Similarly to peaceful conflict termination, government’s victory may not be an entirely preferable conflict outcome for many PRMs. The end of conflict in incumbent’s favour would result in demobilisation of militias and their possible absorption into security forces. The likelihood of swift victory would affect militias’ sources of income and jeopardise their

illicit activities. For those PRMs that are even partially motivated by economic incentives, continuity of armed conflict is more lucrative than its swift end. Keeping in mind that militias are often present in complex conflicts where governments are willing to subcontract violence to extra-state agents, PRMs have plenty of opportunities to emerge as “veto-players” and to influence government’s willingness and ability to militarily win the conflict. As long as incumbent has shared its monopoly on violence with quasi-state agents, PRMs would be in position to affect the course of a conflict in one form or the other. This is not to argue that PRMs would willingly sabotage the incumbent’s victory, but that they, as part of COIN forces, may not be particularly keen on investing all their resources in defeating the rebels. Instead, as shown by scholars (Mazzei 2009; Ahram 2011), militias might exploit the conflict environment to their advantage by both profiteering from the economy of war and by solidifying their political influence. For example, presence of Shia militias amongst Iraqi forces fighting ISIL and allegations of sectarian violence were known to prevent some of Sunni tribes from joining anti-ISIL coalition, therefore prolonging the conflict.³ In a similar vein, paramilitary interests in drug trade had long been an obstacle in dismantling coca plantations in Colombian highlands, which have also provided revenues for left-wing rebels and sustained the economy of civil war.

Whilst government victory is likely to result in disbanding of militias and the end of their illegal activities, rebel victory is almost certainly synonymous with the destruction of PRMs. The persecution of *Interahamwe* militias by the victorious Rwandan Patriotic Front, as well as the violence against former members of Gaddafi’s Revolutionary Guard Corps by various Libyan rebel factions, are the examples of gruesome end that pro-regime agents might meet in case of rebel victory. It is reasonable to assume that in order to avoid physical destruction, militias would eagerly use both their military capacity and veto-powers to prevent regime opponents from emerging victorious.

Bearing in mind that cases of successful demobilisation and reintegration of pro-regime militias are few, this study argues that, as rational actors, PRMs should be expected to always retain vested interests in longer conflict duration. A possible scenario under which militias might be interested in swift government victory is when militias are protecting the regime from a coup. Yet, even in shorter conflicts, the presence of militias on the eve and in the aftermath of conflict is indicative of unstable political climate or of low-intensity conflict (Carey et al. 2016).

³ See Crisis Group Special Report 3, Counterterrorism pitfalls: What the US fights against ISIS and al-Qaeda should avoid, March 22, 2017.

Militias' own agendas often coincide with incumbents' designs towards extra-state actors. Cases of governments purposefully preserving militias after the termination of hostilities in order to re-deploy them if the war recurs, or to use them for persecuting other political rivals are not uncommon. For instance, the Philippines' Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGU) were deployed not only against Moro militants, but also in the government's long-lasting conflict with the Communist Party of Philippines (CPP). Militias are also used to settle scores with demobilised rebels. Examples from Nicaragua and Colombia support this assumption (Mazzei 2009). It is not uncommon for incumbents to "conceal" PRMs in order to re-deploy them in future. Both Sudanese Janjaweed and Sierra Leone's Kamajors were partially demobilised, integrated with security forces, and eventually redeployed in successive armed conflicts by their respective patrons. Since the cessation of violence is potentially disadvantageous for inactive or temporarily "demobilised" and "reintegrated" militias, they would most likely act as negative veto players.

In other cases, governments may decide to co-opt PRMs when militias become so powerful during the conflict that their demobilisation is beyond the incumbent's capacities. For example, Ukraine's volunteer battalions – due to their ability to halt rebel advances – have gained more popular support than the army, and therefore could not be disbanded by the government once the active combat phase of Donbas War was over. Providing militias with a legal status, such as integrating them into formal security forces, sometimes allows governments to remove PRMs from the list of veto players. Even in that case, the presence of former militias amongst the ranks of regular armed forces may complicate peace processes and prevent rebels from negotiating a conflict settlement. After the commanders of several major Ukrainian PRMs were elected as MPs in 2014, militia leaders in parliament have repeatedly thwarted efforts to directly negotiate with pro-Russian separatists in Donbas region (Aliyev 2016: 512). PRM supporters in Ukraine's parliament have also blocked all legal proposals on granting a special autonomy status to the separatists' controlled enclaves.

As long as incumbents have at their disposal a diversity of pro-regime armed groups, which could be deployed not only in combat, but also in civilian persecution, control and intelligence gathering, their willingness to compromise, may be reduced. Governments retain militias not only when they are unable to disband pro-regime groups, but also when they consider PRMs useful. If the incumbent insists on keeping militias, along with favouring military approach towards the conflict settlement, civil war is likely to become protracted. As shown by previous studies, governments pursue military solutions to conflicts only when opponents are weak enough to be defeated militarily, or when rebels are too radical to

negotiate with (Cunningham et al. 2009). Much in contrast to other classical dyadic conflict protagonists – governments, rebels and third parties – militias are a unique category of veto players with vested interests in longer conflict duration. Unlike other veto players, PRMs are much harder to bring to a negotiation table and it is also harder for militias to disengage from violence. Similarly to private military contractors, PRMs are a type of extra-dyadic actors thriving amidst political violence and instability. All of the above suggests that the presence of PRMs in civil wars is both potentially conducive to and instrumental for conflict continuity.

H1: Civil wars involving pro-government militias last longer than conflicts that do not.

Numbers matter?

Drawing on theoretical assumptions advanced in the first part of the argument, we assume that the presence of militias increases the number of relevant stakeholders and makes it harder to terminate conflicts. In this part of the argument, it is proposed that more militias does not simply indicate higher number of veto-players, but also emphasises the complexity of multi-actor conflicts. As detailed in previous sections, PRMs differ in terms of their function, structure and objectives. While some militia groups are deployed in ground offensives, others perform defensive purposes, collecting intelligence and guarding civilian facilities (Clayton and Thomson 2014). Other PRM functions include, but not limited to operating as “death squads,” vigilante mobs, pro-regime enforcers, or as semi-criminal gangs. The impact of these types of militias on conflict dynamics and duration is vastly diverse. Numbers of PRMs involved in civil wars differ from case to case. For example, more than ten militia groups supported the government during the Sri Lankan civil war. In countries with more than one active intrastate conflict, PRMs are often spread across several conflict areas. From the early 1980s, there were over 20 militia groups operating in the Philippines, most of which were based in the troubled areas of Mindanao and Cebu islands (PGMD 2014).

As estimated by Stanton (2015: 907), from 1989 to 2010, “in about two-thirds of the conflicts involving militias, multiple pro-regime militias were active.” Indeed, as long as the government is supportive of militias, PRMs start mushrooming either directly mobilised by incumbents or emerging independently, but falling under the government’s patronage at a

later stage. The involvement of several PRMs in civil war also increases the likelihood that a combination of the above listed types of militias is present in the conflict zone.

Deploying numerous PRM may not necessarily increase the incumbent's chances of victory, or military superiority, but it may complicate the conflict resolution processes by increasing the number of conflict participants, or veto players, making it harder for governments and rebels to negotiate a settlement. Given that different militias have different agendas, sources of funding and support, either disbanding or neutralising them might prove a serious challenge for the incumbent. While some Ukrainian PRMs decided to accept the government's offer of an official status within the ministries of Interior and Defence, following the ceasefire agreement in eastern Ukraine, others decided to remain outside formal security forces, seeking to preserve their independence from the regime (Aliyev 2016). A similar scenario occurs in Iraq with Shia volunteer battalions, many of which, in spite of pursuing similar goals with the incumbent, remain outside the government's control and jurisdiction.

The presence of multiple PRMs in conflict zones is not necessarily an indicator of militia strength or the abundance of funding sources, rather it might be an expression of their relative weakness. The incumbent's inability to maintain law and order may be the cause behind the emergence of various types of PRMs and the appearance of similar or competing militia organisations, as is the case with post-2014 Iraq (Sly 2015). The involvement of numerous militias not only increases the number of veto players, but also exacerbates the uncertainty and contributes towards complex and protracted conflicts. Hence, accounting for the numbers of veto players on the ground might offer an explanation as to why some conflicts last longer than others.

H2: Presence of several pro-regime militia groups in a conflict zone increases conflict duration.

Stronger militias fight longer wars?

Another theoretical assumption relevant to conflict duration is the strength of PRMs. Whilst previous parts of the argument suggest that militias matter as veto-players and their numbers are likely to hint towards conflict complexity, militia strength, or the lack thereof, is likely to affect their interests and objectives. PRMs ability to act as veto-players may depend not only

on their numbers, but also on their military and political strength. Bearing in mind differences in terms of functions and capacities of militias, their impact on conflict dynamics may vary. Stronger PRMs not only are able to survive longer, but they also might prevent conflict participants from reaching a consensus. The existence of large and powerful PRMs is an indicator of availability of funding, of popular support and of favourable conditions. As seen from the cases of Ukraine's and Iraq's militias, numerically strong PRMs are particularly hard to demobilise, disarm and integrate with formal security forces. Leaders of stronger PRMs will be inclined to use their strength to secure their organisations. Longer lasting conflicts would enable these groups to maintain their strength. Larger militia groups are better positioned to bargain with the incumbent and to manipulate the elites. Needless to say that the presence of strong PRMs will reduce the opportunities for reconciliation and peace-making. These factors suggest that the strength of militias is conducive to longer civil wars.

H3: The stronger pro-government militias are, the longer the conflict will last.

Data and variables

This article examines the role of pro-regime militias in all civil wars from 1991 to 2015. The definition of civil war is taken from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)/Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), which define intrastate armed conflict as “as a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths” (UCDP 2015: 4). The data on civil wars is adopted from the Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD) v.4-2016 that codes all civil violence incidents from 1946 to 2015 as separate conflict episodes. The ACD supplies exact dates for the start and the end of each conflict episode. This coding produces 250 conflict episodes in the dataset. The unit of analysis is civil war episode. The data on pro-regime militias is derived from the Pro-Government Militia Database (PGMD) (Carey et al. 2013), which provides the list of 332 militia groups active between 1981 and 2007. The issue of missing data on militia groups existing and appearing after 2007 had been addressed by coding new and active groups for 2007-2015 period in accordance with the PGMD methodology. LexisNexis search engine was employed to search international news sources for key terms identified by Carey et al. (2013: 251). In addition, the PGMD contains data on militia membership and allows

controlling for the presence of several PRMs active in one country over a selected period. In almost 70% of civil wars with militia presence, more than one PRM was found active.

Dependent variable is the likelihood that a civil war will end in a particular interval of time, defined as conflict *duration*. The variable measures the total length of intrastate conflicts in accordance with the UCDP's definition of civil war as an armed confrontation exceeding 25 conflict-related deaths per year. ACD codes each conflict episode as ended if it becomes inactive for at least one year following the year when conflict started. Conflict duration is measured in days since the start of each conflict episode until its end. For ongoing episodes, the last observed date is December 31, 2015.

The *PRMs* is the key explanatory variable that controls for the involvement, or the lack thereof, of pro-regime militias in each civil war episode. *PRMs* is coded as 1 if at least one militia group is found present during 80 per cent of conflict duration, and as 0 if PRMs were present during less than 20 per cent of total conflict episode duration. To account for the probability of PRMs emerging at later stages of conflicts, I introduce *PRM at conflict start* variable, which measures the presence of militias during the first 30 days of each conflict. *Multiple PRMs* is a dummy controlling for the presence of more than one PRM in each conflict episode. In order to control for whether multiple PRMs prolong the duration of civil war as compared to only one PRM, I introduce *Single PRM* variable that codes episodes with only one militia group present. *PRM strength* is a highest headcount of the militia groups' membership, based on the PGMD data.

A set of control variables plausibly relevant to civil war duration is also considered. Belligerents' properties have figured prominently amongst factors accounting for longer civil wars (Collier et al. 2004; Buhaug et al. 2009). To account for rebel strength, I add a dummy distinguishing between strong and weak rebel groups (*rebel strength*) designed upon a similar variable from Salehyan et al. (2011).⁴ Existing research on conflict duration emphasised the importance of political regime type, economic development, population size and terrain (Buhaug et al. 2009; Cederman et al. 2013). Controlling for political regime type in conflict duration studies allows examining as to whether democracies indeed avoid longer conflicts (Fearon 2004). I rely on democracy scores from Polity IV dataset that identifies a country as democratic (score 6 and above) or undemocratic (-6 or below). Scholars tend to disagree on

⁴ I also measured government capacity, yet the inclusion of that variable does not make any difference. Therefore, the variable is excluded from the report of empirical findings. This echoes previous studies, which have shown that government capacity, as measured in military strength, expenditure, etc., offers limited explanation as to why some incumbents tend to mobilise militias while others do not (Carey et al. 2013).

whether ethnicity and religion have an effect on conflict longevity (Fearon 2004; Cederman et al. 2013). Variables on *ethnic and religious fractionalisation* (Fearon and Laitin 2003), coded as a log of percentage of ethnic and religious minorities among the country's population, are introduced to control for the ethnicity's and religion's effect on conflict dynamics. A log of real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in thousands of current U.S. dollars from the World Bank database is included to measure whether wealthier states are less keen on participating in longer conflicts. The data on population size from the World Bank database is employed to control for the effect of more populated countries on conflict duration. In accordance with the literature on conflict duration (Cunningham 2009: 885), more populous countries may be expected to host longer conflicts. At the country level, a percentage of mountainous terrain was included to account for the effect of terrain on conflict duration. The data on mountainous areas was adopted from Fearon and Laitin (2003). Following the argument that the advantages of terrain roughness enable rebels to hide and regroup and, therefore, wage longer wars (Buhaug et al. 2009), this variable is introduced in order to control for whether countries that are more mountainous are more likely to host longer conflicts.

Empirical analysis

Cox proportional hazards models were employed to test the relationship between PRM presence and the incidence of longer conflicts (Table 1).⁵ The "Event History" models have been traditionally used by scholars seeking to examine the duration of armed conflicts (Collier et al. 2004; DeRouen and Sobek 2004). Since this analysis is concerned with whether civil wars with PRM involvement last longer, variables with negative coefficients would indicate that the PRM presence is not conducive to shorter conflicts. Cox models in Table 1 estimate a hazard that a conflict will terminate in each 30-day interval.⁶ If H1 is to be validated, there should be a negative relationship between PRM participation and the possibility of civil wars ending within 30 days. This will indicate that if conflicts fail to end within a 30-day period, they would last longer until their end. For the purposes of survival

⁵ The analyses in Table 1 were rerun as logistic regressions using Binary Time-Series Cross-Sectional (BTSCS) analysis. The findings were similar to those reported in Table 1.

⁶ Previous studies used different thresholds of conflict duration, most of which employed a calendar month as unit of analysis (See for example, Cunningham 2006: 882). As few conflicts start and end on the first and last day of a calendar month, employing a 30-day period seems more intuitive. It also enables to capture the exact start-end-date of each conflict episode more accurately.

analysis, conflicts that terminate within 30 days are coded as 0 in the censored set, and all conflicts that continue beyond a 30-day period are coded as 1.⁷

<Table 1.>

The PRM variable in Model 1 is negative and statistically significant (at .001), which indicates that civil wars with militia presence are unlikely to terminate in 30 days.⁸ Plotting survival estimates of conflicts with PRM presence on the above Cox regression models (Figure 1), demonstrates that civil wars with militia involvement tend to last almost 8,000 days longer than conflicts with no PRMs present.

<Figure 1.>

Analysis of descriptive statistics provides further details. Although the number of civil wars involving PRMs (136) is not markedly larger than the number of conflicts without militias (114), conflicts with militias on average last more than three times longer (2906.16) than intrastate conflicts without militias (996.05). These findings render support for H1 and confirm the theoretical argument of this study that conflicts with extra-dyad veto actors have a higher tendency to last longer than conflicts with a classical government-rebel dichotomy. H2 expects that the presence of multiple PRM groups in a conflict zone increases the likelihood of longer conflicts. Model 2 in Table 1 controls for the involvement of more than one militia group in each conflict. The presence of multiple PRMs in a conflict zone is negative and achieves significance at the .001 level, meaning that higher numbers of militias reduce the likelihood of civil wars ending within a month (or 30 days). To examine how the assumption on the numbers of militias would hold if we test the duration of conflict episodes with just one PRM present, I introduce variable *SinglePRM* in Model 3. Although the coefficient of this variable is negative, it does not reach a threshold of statistical significance, suggesting that conflicts with just one militia group present have higher chances of ending in a month than wars with numerous PRMs involved. The relationship between the exact number of PRMs and conflict duration is hard to measure due to the frequent circulation in

⁷ The DV combines two variables: the overall duration of each conflict episode (time variable) and short duration of 30 days (failure/event set).

⁸ Models report likelihood coefficients, but identical models were also calculated for hazard rates. They produced similar results and therefore are not presented here.

the numbers of militia groups involved in each conflict. Numerous PRMs (over 30%) disappear during the first several years of civil wars, replaced by other groups at later stages of the conflict. For example, amongst ten PRMs created during Sri Lanka's conflict with the LTTE, six emerged immediately after the conflict onset and disappeared within first five years of the conflict in the mid-1980s. Other four groups were assembled in the 1990s, and only two of them existed until the end of civil war.

Testing H3 produced mixed findings. The PRM strength variable is tested in all three models, where it remains negative. However, the variable acquires statistical significance only in Model 2 for multiple militias. This makes sense given that the presence of more than one militia group in one conflict episode increases the probability of PRMs to be numerically stronger and therefore more capable to affect conflict dynamics. Hence, the PRM strength appears to be particularly valid in civil wars with numerous militia groups, which indirectly reinforces the H2 on that multiple PRMs are likely to increase conflict duration.

Findings related to conflict-level controls have failed to produce statistically significant results. Despite lacking significance, a number of controls are in negative direction, suggesting the likelihood of their relationship with conflict duration. Ethnic exclusion, regime type, population size and the terrain may have potential implications in conflicts with multiple PRMs. With the exception of ethnicity, these factors also hold for civil wars with single militia group involved. These results echo findings by other scholars. For instance, in Fearon's (2004: 285) study on civil war duration, ethnicity, democracy, population size and GDP all produced no statistically significant findings. Similarly, Cunningham (2006: 886) reported that population size and ethnic fractionalisation emerge as irrelevant for civil war duration in multi-actor conflicts.

Longer civil wars create (more)militias?

The longer civil wars last the higher is the probability of new armed groups to emerge and to affect conflict duration. This leads to the possibility that longer conflicts produce (more)militias and that it is the conflict duration that drives the emergence of PRMs. This in turn influences the potential of the conflict lasting longer and shapes the role and effectiveness of militias and other armed actors involved in the conflict. To address the issue of endogeneity, I analyse descriptive statistics of the dataset. A cursory look through the data reveals that while in 55 per cent of cases militias already existed prior to the start of conflict, in 80 per cent of civil wars, additional militia groups emerged soon – or at various early

stages of conflict – after the civil war onset. Summary statistics of the dataset show that over 50 per cent of PRMs emerge during the first five years of conflicts. About a quarter of all PRMs was assembled prior to the start of civil wars, or have survived and evolved from previous conflicts. After the first ten years of conflicts, new PRMs appeared to emerge only in civil wars which already had one or more militia groups present. Descriptive statistics indicate that only a small number (less than two percent) of PRMs are assembled more than twenty years into the conflict, suggesting that if militias are still present in protracted conflicts they are likely to be survivors from earlier conflict stages.

The ability of militias to survive over extended periods might also be an indication that PRMs perform important functions and therefore managed to avoid demobilisation. This reduces the possibility that longer wars explain the presence of PRMs and that militias emerge due to conflict longevity, for instance, owing to civilians' frustration with rebels. Although some militias could be an effect of long wars rather than a cause, the cases of PRMs being mobilised in response to protracted conflicts are rare. Bearing in mind that only a small portion of PRMs emerge at later stages of conflicts, the probability of long lasting civil wars producing militias is limited. To sum up, longer civil wars are more likely to produce more PRMs than shorter conflicts, but the emergence of militias tends to occur at early stages of conflicts. Bearing in mind the high number of PRMs present in conflict-affected countries prior to the start of conflicts, militias seem to have higher impact on conflict duration rather than the other way around.

Militias and conflict duration in Chechen Wars

Whilst quantitative tests indicate strong association between militia presence and conflict duration, brief case study analysis presented in this section provides additional insights into militias' effect on conflict continuity.

The First Chechen War was fought from 1994 to 1996 between Chechen separatists and Russian army for the control of the breakaway republic. Throughout the conflict, numerous Chechen rebel factions – consisting of both nationalist and Islamist groups – opposed Russian government. Notwithstanding Russian attempts to deploy rival Chechen clans against the insurgents during the first months of conflict, no significant efforts were made to mobilise pro-incumbent militias. In 1996, the First Chechen War terminated after both sides of the dyad signed a peace accord resulting in the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya.

With no quasi-state actors involved in conflict, a consensus amongst various rebel factions was relatively easy to achieve.

The Second Chechen War erupted in 1999 following Chechen invasion of neighbouring autonomous republic of Dagestan and a series of apartment bombings allegedly committed by Chechen Islamists in several major Russian cities. After a lightning advance into Chechnya, Russian military began actively mobilising pro-Moscow militias from amongst defected rebels and those Chechen clans who opposed the separatists (Souleimanov 2014: 12). By 2000, a 7,000-strong paramilitary force was assembled (Souleimanov 2014: 17). Pro-regime militias *kadyrovtsy*, were named after their commander, a former rebel religious leader, Akhmad Kadyrov. Several militia battalions were created, composed of members of different clans. Some of the *kadyrovtsy* battalions had more former insurgents in their ranks than others. Since leaders of two major militia battalions (*Vostok* and *Zapad*) remained in constant rivalry with each other and with the newly appointed head of the Chechen Republic, there was little unity amongst the militias. Armed and funded by Russia, militias first of all represented interests of their commanders. Notwithstanding differences, *kadyrovtsy* emerged as an effective COIN force that has contributed to the weakening of anti-Russian insurgency in Chechnya (Souleimanov et al. 2016).

The deployment of PRMs in Chechnya transformed the conflict into multi-actor confrontation. Despite performing COIN tasks, *kadyrovtsy* vigorously pursued their own interests (Smid and Mares 2015). These included settling scores with rival clans, confiscation of property from suspected insurgents, their relatives and sympathisers, as well as monopolising control over lavish development funds allocated by Moscow on rebuilding the republic (Souleimanov and Aliyev 2014; 2015a). Due to their reliance on collective punishment of insurgents' families, *kadyrovtsy* were soon embroiled in blood feud with members of various Chechen clans (Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015b; 2016; 2017). All of the above has made swift victory by the government undesirable for the militias. Owing to the prominent role of *kadyrovtsy* and their image of ruthless pro-regime enforcers, all prospects of peaceful conflict resolution became distant. Although by 2006, *kadyrovtsy* received a formal status of special forces within the Ministry of Interior, they continued to exist as private militias of the current head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov. As of 2017, groups of Islamist insurgents continue operating in Chechnya and the conflict – that has started with the Second Chechen War – remains ongoing.

This brief case study demonstrates that the emergence of PRMs contributed towards conflict continuity in Chechnya. Deep-seated disagreements within the *kadyrovtsy* camp,

particularly during the early stages of conflict, precluded the possibility of swift conflict settlement. Militias' military strength enabled them to act as top-tier "veto-players" strongly opposed to either peace talks with insurgents or militia demobilisation. Committed to preserve martial law status in the republic and determined to continue receiving COIN funding from Moscow, *kadyrovtsy* remained disinterested in completely eliminating the insurgency and instead focused on protecting their own interests.

Conclusion

The main argument of the study posited that pro-regime militias embroiled in civil wars cannot be ignored as one of the key factors explaining civil war duration. The empirical analysis has demonstrated that the involvement of PRMs in intrastate conflicts concurs with the incidence of longer civil wars. The impact of militias on conflict longevity can be explained both by the "veto players" theory – which argues that more conflict participants increase the risk of longer conflicts – and by the PRMs' own interests in conflict continuity, defined by their diversity and strength.

On the one hand, unlike other veto players examined by previous studies – such as different rebel groups, governments and third-party actors – militias are the least willing participants in peace processes. Ending civil wars is rarely in the interests of militias and few militia combatants are eager to demobilise after the end of conflict. Due to their vested interests in conflict continuation, pro-regime militias may be expected to reject the peace. PRMs may also have low interest in swift victory by either side of dyad, since such an outcome would almost certainly entail the end of militia activity. On the other hand, incumbents will seek to keep militias as long as they are useful. Militias might be re-deployed to a different conflict area or maintained to persecute regime opponents. All of the above show that pro-regime militias act as crucial stakeholders in intrastate conflicts with high potential not only to influence conflicts' dynamics, but also their duration.

The findings of this study offer additional support to the argument that multiple conflict protagonists contribute towards the longevity of conflicts. This study has sought to improve our understanding of the duration of intrastate conflicts by bridging beyond the two-actor approaches of studying the dynamics of civil wars. The key policy implication to be drawn from this study is that pro-regime militias – as one of the top extra-dyad actors in civil wars – cannot be ignored in peace-making efforts. Since using militias allows governments to avoid

accountability for violence and to “subcontract” persecution of civilians to extra-state agents, incumbents deploying militias in civil wars might be less willing to terminate conflicts. In their turn, militias – as conflict powerbrokers – remain in opposition to peace talks and tend to reject concessions to rebels. Taken together, these findings suggest that policies seeking to limit the duration of armed conflicts, amongst other priorities, have to consider extra-dyad actors as crucial conflict-stakeholders.

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